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SUBJECT: JERUSALEM MEDIA REACTION (02/22): Deputy Secretary Jacob Lew meets with Palestinian Authority leadership in Ramallah

Main Stories:

-----The dailies report on the meeting between Deputy Secretary Jacob Lew and Palestinian Authority (PA) Prime Minister Salam Fayyad yesterday in Ramallah. Reports note that Prime Minister Fayyad expressed his gratitude for the generous US support to the PA budget and other projects. Fayyad noted that there is a need for tangible progress on the political track to force Israel to stop settlement activities and incursions into the West Bank and to lift all restrictions on movement and access to support the development of the Palestinian economy. Reports note that Lew praised the PA's progress on the economic and security tracks and called for greater cooperation between the Palestinians and US at all levels. The dailies also report on Lew's visit to the Palestinian Medical Center in Ramallah and meeting with the Minister of Health, as well as his visit to the Ministry of Planning.

Al-Ayyam and Al-Hayat Al-Jadida lead with news on Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announcing that Israel added two holy sites in the West Bank to a list of national heritage sites within his "Plan to Rehabilitate and Strengthen Israel's National Heritage Infrastructure." The two sites are Hebron's Ibrahimi Mosque, known to Israelis as the Cave of the Patriarchs, and Rachel's Tomb in Bethlehem. Maan News Agency reported that PA officials immediately condemned the Israeli announcement. "This announcement is an act of aggression against the cultural and religious rights of the Palestinian people," said Dr Hamdan Taha, Director of the PA Tourism Ministry's antiquities department, in a telephone interview with Maan. Reports also note that there is a new Israeli plan to build approximately 549 housing units near the Beit Safafa neighborhood in Jerusalem.

Al-Quds leads with news on a French/Spanish initiative seeking EU

recognition of a Palestinian state in 18 months based on Prime Minister Fayyad's plan to establish the state by 2011. President Abbas and PA officials welcomed this initiative, while reports note that Israel strongly opposes it. In related news, the dailies report that Qatar donated \$10 million to the PA to support emergency humanitarian needs for Gaza.

The dailies report on PA President Mahmoud Abbas' visit to France yesterday and meetings with French Foreign Minister Bernard Kuchner. Reports note that he asked France to exert pressure on Israel to reverse its decision to add the West Bank holy sites to their list of heritage sites.

Sunday, February 21:

Al-Hayat Al-Jadida and Al-Quds lead with quotes from Saturday's Le Monde interview with President Abbas. Abbas noted that he fears the Palestinian people may lose hope that there will be an independent Palestinian state due to the stalemate in the negotiations. Abbas also noted that the lack of negotiations may lead to an eruption of violence in the Palestinian territories. Abbas reiterated that he does not believe the Israelis will make any concessions without pressure from the US. The leading headline in Al-Quds quotes Abbas asking the US to exert pressure on Israel.

Independent daily Al-Ayyam front pages news on Israeli sources expressing dissatisfaction in the statements by French Foreign Minister Kuchner expressing his willingness to recognize the Palestinian state before its borders are set. The Israeli sources fear that the Palestinians may ensure secret guarantees from the US

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and Europe regarding the recognition of a state without negotiating its borders.

Al-Quds continues to report on the US response to Palestinian questions regarding the resumption of peace talks between the Palestinians and Israelis. Head of the Political committee of the PLC Abdallah Abdallah said in a statement that the Palestinians requested that the Arab Follow-Up Committee convene to discuss the US response.

According to reports, Ambassador David Hale told the PA that the US is committed to a three month timeframe for indirect negotiations.

The three dailies quote Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair saying he hopes negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians will resume in the coming weeks. Blair said Special Envoy George Mitchell has made progress in attempting to resume negotiations between the two sides. He also noted that it remains important for the Palestinians to have a government with "credible institutions" with whom Israel can negotiate.

The three dailies continue to report on the murder of Hamas leader Al-Mabhouh in Dubai. Al-Ayyam reports in its headline quoting the Dubai Police Chief saying to an Emirate newspaper that there is new evidence, including recorded phone calls, which prove the involvement of Mossad in the murder. The coverage also reports that an Israeli official who refused to reveal his identity refuted these accusations.

Al-Hayat Al-Jadida front pages news on settlers and IDF soldiers attacking Palestinians in Bethlehem, Hebron, Nablus and Gaza on Saturday. 10 Palestinians were injured, according to reports. Al-Ayyam runs a front page photo of protestors from Peace Now demonstrating in Tel-Aviv Saturday against Israel's policy in the West Bank. Al-Quds reports that settlers confiscated 10 dunums of the land in Sinjel village in Ramallah yesterday by force.

Saturday, February 20:

Al-Quds and Al-Ayyam run front page stories on Jerusalem Mayor Nir Birkat saying in an interview with the three Palestinian daily newspapers that he will work on demolishing part of the Al Bustan neighbourhood in Silwan (East Jerusalem). He said that residents will not be forced out of Silwan, but rather re-located according to

a project the municipality has prepared which will be announced in the near future. Barkat is quoted saying, "I believe that Jerusalem is unified and insist on developing it from a tourist perspective." Barkat added that he is working according to well-thought plans and that the next phase will witness drastic changes in the city. Ahmad Rwaidy, head of Jerusalem Unit within the Office of the President, told Al-Ayyam that if Barkat is serious about improving the conditions for the people in Silwan then he has to first cancel demolition orders for 300 houses and issue a decision to demolish the Beit Yonatan building that was taken over by settlers.

The three dailies run front page stories quoting well-informed Palestinian sources telling Al-Ayyam that it is premature to talk about a specific date for starting indirect Palestinian-Israeli negotiations through US mediation. The source indicated that President Abbas told Ambassador David Hale during their meeting two days ago in Ramallah that the Palestinian response to the US proposal will be whatever the Arab states decide when they meet next month. The sources added that Hale conveyed to President Abbas the

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US response to questions Abbas asked regarding the proposal for indirect negotiations; however, the American responses were not very clear according to reports. Chief Palestinian negotiator Saeb Erekat was quoted denying news that the indirect negotiations will resume next week but stressed that discussions and consultations with the US in this regard are on-going.

BLOCK QUOTE:

1) Al-Quds runs an editorial on February 22, under the title "A European Initiative?!" which commends the Spanish/French initiative to gain EU recognition of the Palestinian state. The author notes, however, that the Palestinians need more than good intentions. They need tangible and concrete steps on the ground to force Israel to accept international laws.

2) Abdallah Awwad, writing in Al-Ayyam on February 21 under the title "Why Return to Negotiations?" opines that returning to negotiations with the Israelis is useless because Palestinians will realize that there is nothing that the US, Europe or Israel can give to them at this stage.

RUBINSTEIN